A lesson in how history repeats itself

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Marshall Somerset reviews the film: The Fog of War: 11 lessons from the life of Robert S MacNamara

"Military commanders may make mistakes. 10, 100, 100,000 people may die because of the mistakes. But the key is to learn from them: make two, three, even four, but don’t make five or six. But with nuclear weapons there is only one mistake. Make that and civilisation destroys itself."

Robert S MacNamara was US defence secretary from 1961 to 1968. He served under two Presidents, Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Thus he was in power during the Cuban missile crisis and during the slide into fullscale war in Vietnam. Errol Morris’s film is part documentary, part validation of his life; MacNamara, now in his eighties, looks to the camera and gives his side of the story of some of the major events of the post war period.

As with most people looking back on their lives there are embellishments, backsliding and blame shifting. The difference is that most people have not been responsible in part for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

MacNamara tells Errol Morris that he was central to formulating the strategy of fire bombing the timber-built Japanese cities. On film we see pictures of destroyed cities overlaid by the numbers killed in each of the 20 or more cities bombed. The raids destroyed on average more than 50 per cent of each city bombed.

There is some debate about the role of MacNamara in this. The plan is likely to have been the work of its enthusiastic enforcer airforce General Curtis LeMay, a man even MacNamara considers to be a psychotic killer. But irrespective of the doubts, we can agree with MacNamara when he says that if the allies had lost the war then undoubtedly he and LeMay “would have been tried for war crimes”.

After the war, MacNamara went into business for the Ford Motor Company where, by his own modest account, he rose to be the most highly paid executive in the world by the early 1960s. In 1962 he was lured to Washington, to be part of Kennedy’s fabled Camelot as defence secretary.

His baptism of fire was the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is here that MacNamara supposedly learned one of his 11 lessons: the skill of empathising with his enemy. A lesson he was to completely forget during the Vietnam war.

In October 1963, there were already 16,000 US military advisers in Vietnam. MacNamara claims that both he and Kennedy wanted to get them out within two years. But in the very same month the South Vietnamese leader and Kennedy himself were assassinated. It is the only time on film where we see MacNamara genuinely sorrowful for a death, not that of thousands of US soldiers in Vietnam, not the hundreds of thousands Japanese bombed nor the 3.4 million Vietnamese killed but one US President.

By 1964, policy is drifting and more advisers were going in to shore up the South Vietnamese puppet regime. In February, MacNamara was to make an important foreign policy statement that would have not mentioned Vietnam, which was still being kept out of the newspapers. President Johnson called him to make amendments, specifically to talk about the domino theory: the idea that if South Vietnam fell then the whole of south east Asia would also fall to the Communists. MacNamara protested but still made the domino? speech and so in the minds of the US people Vietnam was part of the Cold War. At the beginning of the next year 25,000 marines went in, in MacNamara’s words, “to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people” and to “keep South Vietnamese secure”. An antiwar movement began
to take shape but MacNamara in the film still defends the policy: “The United States of America fought in Vietnam for eight years for what it believed to be good and honest reasons: to protect our security, prevent the spread of totalitarian communism, and promote individual freedom and political democracy.”

But in the film he begins to distance himself from the war and even goes into self critical mode where he identifies his own failure in stopping it. He and other supposedly pro-peace advisers failed “through ignorance, inattention, flawed thinking, political expediency, and lack of courage.”

However, the real reason is not his or anyone else’s lack of courage. Rather it is clear that he lacked “empathy,” a trait with which he claims to have prevented a nuclear war over the Cuban Missile crisis. Perhaps the fact that Soviet missiles could have destroyed Baltimore, Los Angeles and Washington aided this empathy. Because the Vietnamese could not he simply could not understand what they were fighting for.

In the 1980s he actually met his Vietnamese political opposite from the 1960s who told him: “You thought we were in league with the Chinese and the Russians. But we had fought the Chinese for hundreds of years. We were fighting for our independence.” The Vietnamese saw the war as a war against a colonial power “it was this that MacNamara and the US government could not afford to empathise with even if they had wanted to.

There is a twelfth lesson, one that MacNamara doesn’t dare to mention but it is the most relevant one for today. How the US, as a global superpower overstretched itself, militarily and economically against a far weaker opponent: how it got bogged down in Vietnam and had eventually had to cut and run in the most humiliating defeat a superpower ever suffered. Who says history never repeats itself?

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